7 of 10 Handicapped Graduates Found 'Productive'

By Debra Viadero

Nearly 70 percent of handicapped youths were engaged in a "productive activity" such as working, studying, or raising children one year after leaving school, according to the first national study to look at how students fare after special education.

Researchers said it was too soon to tell whether the findings reflect on the effectiveness of special education. The data, they said, represent "a mixed bag, with both good news and bad news" for special educators.

"Whether the glass seems half full or half empty depends largely on the expectations we hold for these youths," said Mary Wagner, who directed the study by the California research firm SRI International.

"For many categories of disability, the fact that even a small percentage of youths achieved employment is a triumph," she said.

But the findings also contain, Ms. Wagner said, "stories of wasted potential, of youths not having or not taking advantage of opportunities for productive contributions to society."

Known as the National Longitudinal Transition Study, the $5-million, five-year project was mandated by the Congress in 1983. It tracks the progress of 8,000 disabled youths between the ages of 13 and 23 who were enrolled in special-education programs during the 1985-86 school year.

The findings on out-of-school status are contained in the first of what are expected to be a dozen or more papers to emerge from the massive research effort. Future papers will look at the role of vocational education in serving these students, how special-education programs affect scholastic achievement and graduation rates, and why some disabled young people become more independent than similarly disabled peers, among other areas.

Study contains both good and bad news, researchers say.

Differing Success Rates

For this first paper, the researchers said they considered young people to be involved in "productive activities" if they were taking postsecondary courses, working for pay or on a volunteer basis, receiving job-skills training from a source other than family, or—if they were female and married—were raising a child.

The rates of productive activity were highest, the researchers found, among students who were deaf or hard-of-hearing, speech-impaired, or learning-disabled. At least 80 percent of the young people in each of those categories were actively engaged one year out of school, according to the study.

Former students who were deaf and blind, multiply handicapped, or mentally retarded fared much worse. Far fewer than half of the young people in those categories were judged to be productive.

Over all, the study revealed, fewer than half of the disabled students who had been out of school for one year had found paid employment. Among those employed, less than 30 percent had full-time jobs and 17 percent were working part-time.

In contrast, the researchers noted, studies of the general population have shown that 62 percent of out-of-school youths between the ages of 16 and 21 are employed.

Handicapped youths differed even more significantly from their nondisabled peers in the area of postsecondary education. The study found that fewer than 15 percent of disabled youths were taking postsecondary courses in their first year out of school, while data from other studies indicate that as many as 56 percent of nonhandicapped youths enroll in such programs in their first two years after high school.

The researchers also found that only 56 percent of the handicapped students they followed had left school by graduating. The rest had either dropped out or "aged out" of special-education programs.

'New Wave' of Studies

"I think that, over all, it's a negative," Eugene Edgar, a professor of education at the University of Washington at Seattle, said of the findings.

"I would hope that you'd have a much higher rate than 69 percent engaged, because the inverse of that—30 percent doing nothing—is pretty awful," he said.

Mr. Edgar, who has been conducting follow-up studies of 2,000 special-education students in his state, said the national study's findings are consistent with those from a "new wave" of smaller studies done in a handful of states since the early 1980's. The new national data, he said, provide a "benchmark" for future research.

In interviews, researchers said all of the studies illustrate a shift in the focus of special-education research.

"Since P.L. 94-142 [the federal special-education law], everybody had been interested in getting kids into special education, placing them in the least restrictive environments" and other issues of access, said Dennis Mithaug, a professor of special education at the University of Colorado. But the new follow-up studies, he said, have "started people wondering whether 'the great intervention' has had any effect."

'Leverage Points'

In addition to studying handicapped students' transitions into adulthood, the SRI study also identified several of what Ms. Wagner called danger signals or "leverage points" that signal a student's increased likelihood of dropping out.

The study showed, for example, that younger students were more likely to drop out of school or receive failing grades than older students.

"This suggests that efforts to put youths on a trajectory toward positive transition outcomes must begin early," the researchers concluded.

Students who belonged to few school or community groups also had poorer outcomes, implying that schools can help by sponsoring extracurricular activities for handicapped young people.

Handicapped students who were male, emotionally disturbed, lower on the socioeconomic ladder, or displayed disciplinary problems were also more likely to have received failing grades during the previous school year.

Copies of "The Transition Experiences of Youth with Disabilities: A Report From the National Longitudinal Transition Study" will be available sometime within the next year from two of the U.S. Education Department's educational resource information centers. The centers are operated by the Council for Exceptional Children in Reston, Va., and the American Institutes for Research in Washington.

Productive Activity Among Youths With Disabilities

Noninstitutionalized youths out of secondary school more than one year who engaged in productive activity in the previous year:

Disability Category	Percentage	Sample Size
All conditions	68.4	797
Learning disabled	81.0	108
Emotionally disturbed	63.4	78
Mentally retarded	47.8	92
Speech impaired	81.4	53
Visually impaired	75.5	83
Deaf	84.3	116
Hard of hearing	81.2	68
Orthopedically impaired	68.4	89
Health impaired	72.1	56
Multiply handicapped	41.4	42
Deaf/blind	52.7	18

SOURCE: "The Transition Experience of Youth With Disabilities," SRI International

Birmingham Weighs School Closings, New Services

By Peter Schmidt

Twelve Birmingham, Ala., schools would be closed, six others consolidated, and the rest restructured to create middle schools, summer Chapter 1 services, and new course offerings under a reorganization plan proposed by Superintendent of Schools Cleveland Hammonds Jr.

Mr. Hammonds said his plan was designed to address "an unevenness of programs and quality across the system" that resulted from changing demographics and shrinking enrollments at many schools in the city.

"This is not a cutback," Mr. Hammonds stressed, adding that the district's budget has a balance of about $21 million. Although some teachers and principals would be shifted to new positions at other schools under the plan, the school chief added, none would be left unemployed.

"We are consolidating schools so that we can use our teaching positions more efficiently," he said.

The superintendent's recommendations are scheduled to go before the city school board for approval on May 9. With the exception of students and parents at a handful of schools slated for closing, few city residents have reacted negatively to the plan, which has received the backing of the Birmingham Education Association and the Birmingham Association of Principals.

"We should have entered into this some years ago," said Errol T. Pharris, president of the principals' association, who criticized the system's previous policies as concentrated too heavily on magnet schools and other narrowly focused programs that were intended to stem the flow of white students from the district.

Stephen Gates/Birmingham Post-Herald

Superintendent Cleveland Hammonds unveils plan.

"The schools targeted for closing so far are no surprise to people within the school system because they had low enrollment," said Samuetta H. Drew, president of the teachers' association.

"I am pleased with the concept," said Linda F. Coleman, a member of the city council. "It looked at the city as a whole."

A 10-Year Process

Mr. Hammonds said his goal in the reorganization, which would be accomplished over the next 10 years, is to establish middle schools for grades 6-8 and to standardize academic programs throughout the system, which serves about 43,000 students.

In addition, Mr. Hammonds said, the district needs to upgrade and renovate its facilities, "but it is not appropriate to do that when you have too many buildings."

The plan also calls for Chapter 1 programs to be extended by six to eight weeks, with additional adjustments as needed. "Youngsters lose ground over the summer," Mr. Hammonds said.

Other recommendations include: the establishment of a transition or half-grade program to help students who are failing return to the classroom; a requirement that each middle school offer a foreign language and algebra or advanced mathematics, and a provision to give each elementary and middle school a full-time counselor.

Most Magnets To Remain

A blue-ribbon panel appointed by the school board had recommended a year ago that the district eliminate its magnet schools and close other schools with low enrollments.

Mr. Hammonds declined to close all of the magnet schools, however, opting instead to try to enrich the programs offered in neighborhood schools that are not magnets.

Jones Valley High School, a magnet school scheduled for conversion to a middle school, was the site of a protest by about 150 students who wanted the facility to stay open.

But at other nonmagnet schools scheduled for closing, the reaction has been one of resignation.

Principal James W. Pharris of the Shields Elementary School, for example, commented that "it was only a matter of time" before his school closed because its enrollment of 196 students made it impossible to provide physical education or music classes.

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